

Okla. AG: Litter could be cause of other bacteria

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TULSA, Okla. (AP) - Even though his investigators tested only one well in a town where a deadly E. coli outbreak took place last year, Oklahoma Attorney General Drew Edmondson thinks poultry litter contamination could be responsible for the bacteria found in other wells in the area.

"I think so, but I'm not prepared to say with the strength that I did on Country Cottage that (poultry litter pollution) is the likely source," Edmondson told The Associated Press in an interview this week.

Last month, Edmondson suggested the unsolved August outbreak at the popular Locust Grove eatery could have been due to contamination from nearby poultry farms, a claim the industry denies.

The mass illness became the largest in the nation's history for the rare E. coli strain O111, killing one man and sickening hundreds more.

Edmondson issued a report concluding that the well at the restaurant "is, and has been, contaminated with poultry waste and associated bacteria, including E. coli."

The report also noted 49 poultry houses within a six-mile radius of Locust Grove that have the capacity to produce 10,000 tons of waste a year.

After his announcement, state investigators began testing wells in the area for free. Nearly 110 have been tested so far, according to Skylar McElhaney, spokeswoman for the state's Department of Environmental Quality.

Twenty of those wells tested positive for E. coli bacteria, which is typically associated with human or animal waste.

But a final analysis returned this week by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention did not find the rare O111 strain.

It did identify three other types of E. coli bacteria: O141, O179, and O113 — all capable of causing illness in humans.

Jackie Cunningham, a spokeswoman for the poultry industry, said the CDC results prove that "there is no connection between poultry litter and the unfortunate E. coli outbreak in Locust Grove last year."

"We applaud (state Department of Health) officials for not bowing to politics or pressure," she said. "And, we're especially pleased that poultry farmers have been exonerated in this investigation."

But Edmondson said even though the particular O111 strain had not been found, other disease-bearing E. coli were identified in other wells near the town.

"To this day, the other wells in that area would not be tested if we hadn't brought the heat on (state officials) a month ago based upon work that my office did in the same arena," he said.

Edmondson is suing 13 Arkansas poultry companies in federal court, claiming that the excessive land application of chicken waste in the 1 million-acre Illinois River watershed could be a danger to public health. A trial is set for September.

Companies named in Edmondson's lawsuit include Tyson Foods Inc., Tyson Poultry Inc., Tyson Chicken Inc., Cobb-Vantress Inc., Cal-Maine Foods Inc., Cargill Inc., Cargill Turkey Production L.L.C., George's Inc., George's Farms Inc., Peterson Farms Inc., Simmons Foods Inc., Cal-Maine Farms Inc. and Willow Brook Foods Inc.

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